

# COMMUNICATION BUSINESS MODEL

How a communication department works, what products and services it offers, what value it creates for the organization and what resources it has available for this purpose.

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# 1. COMMUNICATION BUSINESS MODEL

How a business model can be transferred to communication departments

What contribution does corporate communications make to the success of the organization? Which budgets and personnel resources need to be allocated for this? How can be ensured, that the communication department acts in a targeted manner, is organized in a flexible way, and works efficiently? Which products and services are suitable to achieve the defined communication goals? And how can this be explained to the company management, who generally has little knowledge of the functionality and special features of modern, professional communication? These questions are not new. However, they can now be answered systematically: with the “Communication Business Model” (CBM).<sup>1</sup>

## LIMITS OF COMMON PRACTICE

Those who want to evolve their communication department typically use benchmarks or best practices for orientation, that have been successful elsewhere. The search for a “one best way” dominates the discussion. The optimization of communication departments is often based on blueprints or standards – commonly to be observed in the implementation of a newsroom. The focus is usually on improving operations. This can certainly trigger a positive change in the communication department.

However, in the current communications environment and in the internal competition for resources and acceptance, it is not enough to simply improve operations. Rather, a target orientation towards the framework conditions, stakeholder expectations and the strategic orientation of the organization itself is required. This is generally achieved in three ways:

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<sup>1</sup> The Communication Business Model concept was developed by Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfaß from Leipzig University and the management consultancy Lautenbach Sass.

1. The strategy of group or corporate communications supports the company's objectives (e.g. sales promotion, reputation building, relationship management),
2. the topics of communication are linked to specific goals for positioning (e.g. digitization, diversity), and
3. the communication department's management follows the overall organization (e.g. with regard to the responsibilities of central and decentralized units).

## FROM STRATEGY TO BUSINESS MODELS

Business models are crucial to the competitive profile of all organizations. They are at the center of discussion about the IPO of start-ups, the digital transformation of corporations or the future of communication agencies<sup>2</sup>. Business models are developed for organizations that provide services in external markets and thereby create value for their customers. The question is not only what value is created for customers, but also how it is created for the organization itself and where it is located:

**“A BUSINESS MODEL DESCRIBES THE RATIONALE OF HOW AN ORGANIZATION CREATES, DELIVERS, AND CAPTURES VALUE”.<sup>3</sup>**

Strategies and business models are interrelated<sup>4</sup>. The definition of a long-term corporate strategy leads directly to the development of one or more suitable business models. Within these, specific sub-strategies for the respective markets, functions and activities are then designed and implemented. Therefore, strategies and business models must always be considered and developed together.

Developing and documenting business models reduces complexity. They help top management to structure, focus, and explain their own actions. They are

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<sup>2</sup> Ragas & Culp 2021, 165–174

<sup>3</sup> Osterwalder & Pigneur 2010, 14

<sup>4</sup> Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart 2010

not static and can be updated continuously. If the framework conditions for organizations change fundamentally or disruptively—keyword digitization—the business models must be aligned accordingly.

## **TRANSFERRING THE IDEA TO CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS**

Which business models make sense for communication departments and how to optimize them, however, has hardly yet been discussed. Business models can also be transferred to individual corporate functions and organizational units - including communication departments. What could a communication business model look like?

A business model for corporate communications describes the basic principle of how and with what resources such a department works, what services it provides, how it creates value for an organization, and where the value is directed.<sup>5</sup>

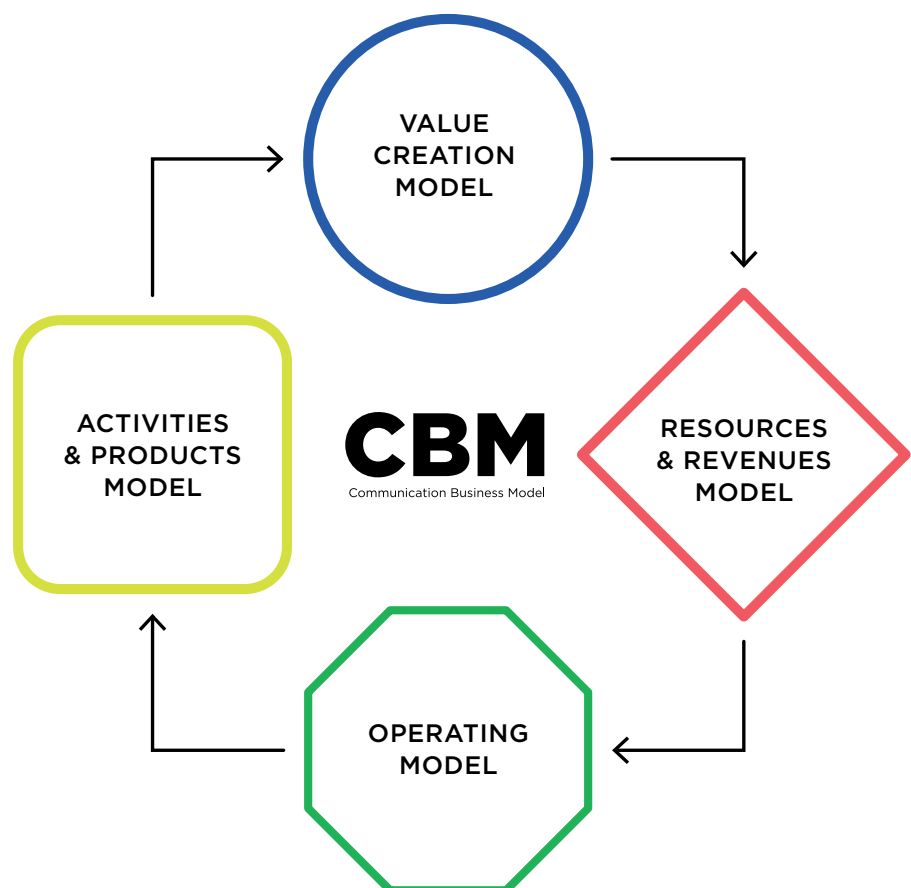
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<sup>5</sup> Zerfaß & Lautenbach 2022, 3

## THE “COMMUNICATION BUSINESS MODEL”

According to the concept developed by Leipzig University and the management consultancy Lautenbach Sass, a communication business model consist of four building blocks. These are the starting points for reviewing, evaluating, and further developing your own communication department.

The business model maps the value creation process within the respective communication unit: from the provision of necessary resources by internal clients to the delivery of services, and the resulting activities and products, to the intangible and tangible values created for the organization. If this is successful, the necessary resources are provided or increased for the department and the actors involved.



## THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS OF A BUSINESS MODEL FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS ARE:

### 1. THE VALUE CREATION MODEL

Corporate communications can contribute to various dimensions of corporate value creation: supporting service provision, building intangible capital, creating room for maneuver, ensuring flexibility. The Value Creation Model clarifies, which values the communication department creates for the organization as a whole or internal clients.

By strengthening customer loyalty or promoting employee commitment, corporate communications supports tangible values. It also contributes to intangibles by protecting reputation, profiling the brand, or shaping culture. By establishing robust relationships, legitimacy, and trust, it creates room for maneuver. Ultimately, communications secure development potential by building thought leadership, crisis resilience, and innovation potential.

### 2. THE RESOURCES & REVENUE MODEL

The resources of a communication department include budgets and personnel capacities. Its successes are reflected in intangible assets; in addition to internal recognition, this involves clear lines of responsibility, and an accepted role within the company. The Resources and Revenue Model lists the resources available to the communication department.

The mandate of corporate communications and how it is perceived by top management also must be determined. A high level of esteem has an impact on the allocation of resources and the freedom necessary for fulfilling communication tasks.

### 3. THE OPERATING MODEL

The operating model defines how the tasks of corporate communications are implemented and managed. It explains the workflows of the communication department.

An operating model for corporate communications can be developed along eight dimensions: Structure & Coordination, Governance & Steering, Processes & Methods, Technology & Assets, Insights & Knowledge, Partnering & Networks, People & Culture, Mission & Alignment. Depending on the situation and needs of the communication department, specific dimensions may be in focus.

#### 4. THE ACTIVITIES & PRODUCTS MODEL

The Activities & Products Model defines the communication department's service portfolio. It must always be focused on creating added value for the company.

The service portfolio includes both corporate communications products (e.g. content in various formats and own channels such as a corporate website or a social intranet) and services (e.g. issue monitoring or communications consulting for the management board). Besides, this includes building and maintaining relationships with relevant stakeholders (e.g. via community management).

The Communication Business Model connects to established models of business research and management practice. In organizations, different business models can be found—for example, in the holding company other than in individual business units. In addition, there are several strategies and business models for almost all markets that can lead to success. Therefore, it would be nonsensical to expect all communication departments to create and capture value in the same way. The Communication Business Model provides a basis for describing the individual business model for a communication department with all its key dimensions and aligning it with its value creation for the organization.



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# FOR WHOM?

## 2. VALUE CREATION

### How corporate communications creates value

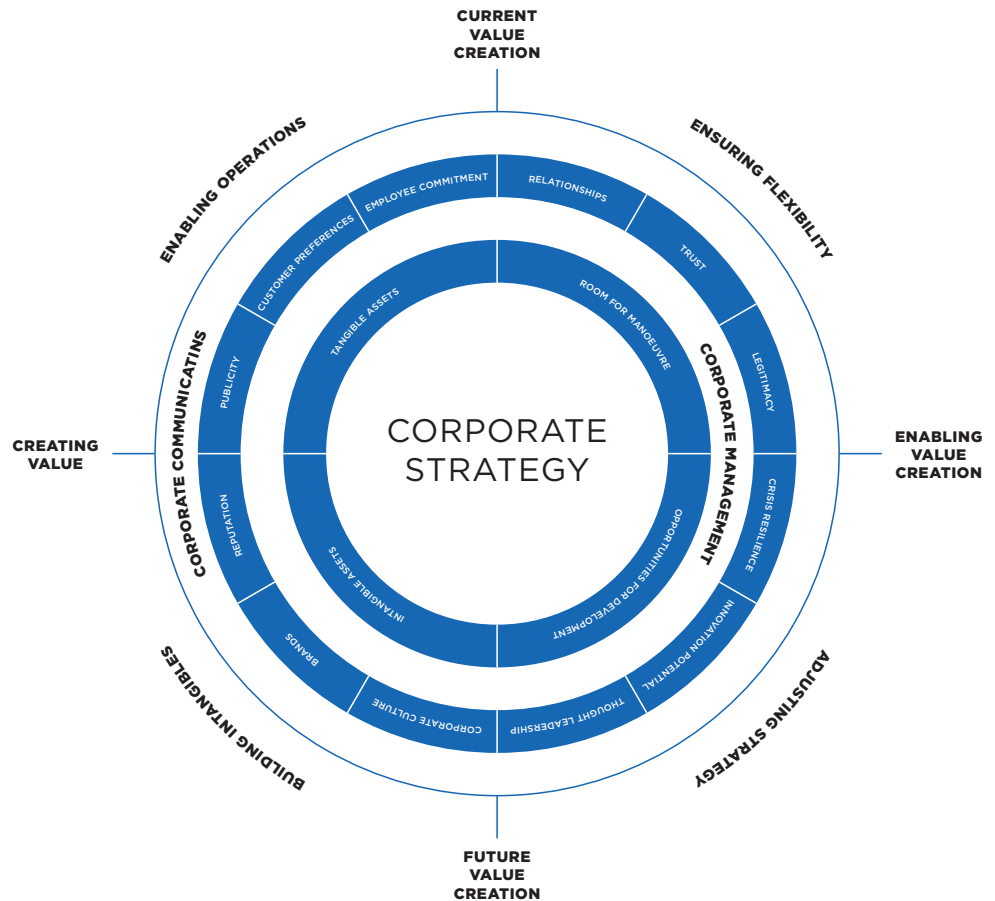
What does communication contribute to achieving organizational goals? How does communication account for the success of the organization and internal clients? This is illustrated by the “Value Creation Model”.

In the classic business management understanding, value creation describes the conversion of resources into goods or services with a higher financial value. Companies have long since moved away from focusing solely on hard figures such as earnings or profitability and from a one-sided orientation towards shareholders and investors (“shareholder value”). They also track softer or non-monetary metrics and are guided by the interests and expectations of all stakeholders (“stakeholder value”). This includes customers and cooperation partners as well as political and economic decision-makers or social stakeholder groups and, first and foremost, employees and potential employees. Corporate communications does not only create and capture value by positioning the company relevantly in the market and differentiating it from competitors. It is also important for value creation by building understanding and acceptance for the organization’s actions and creating trust.

The “Communication Value Circle”, which was developed at Leipzig University, can be used to describe the value contribution.<sup>6</sup> It shows how communication influences the operational business (e.g. customer loyalty, employee commitment, reputation, brand profile) and links it to strategic potentials (e.g. relationship capital, legitimacy, crisis resilience, thought leadership).

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<sup>6</sup> Zerfass, A., & Viertmann, C. (2017), 21(1), 86—91.



## APPROACHES TO CORPORATE VALUE CREATION

The Communication Value Circle is a thinking and planning tool. It helps to find reference points for value creation and to determine the contribution of corporate communications to it. The corporate strategy forms the core of the model and is the starting point for all corporate decisions and objectives. Four dimensions of corporate value creation are assigned to it (inner circle):

- tangible assets,
- intangible assets (e.g. brand, culture, reputation),
- room for maneuver (or “licence to operate”) and
- opportunities for development.

Starting from these dimensions, the company's current planning and business priorities are analyzed and interpreted. Do they lie in strengthening profitability and liquidity? Can the company's reputation be enhanced? Do you need to create room for maneuver for the company? Are development potentials to be improved? This is likely to vary depending on the organization or business unit, and the need for action may change depending on the market situation and other environmental conditions.

When companies change their business activities or strategy, corporate communications must adapt accordingly. Continuously focusing on the core of corporate value creation helps it to remain dynamic and flexible.

## **THE VALUE CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNICATION**

Communication can directly and measurably influence the four dimensions of corporate value creation through its activities (outer circle). It is crucial to derive and systematically relate communication goals to company goals. At a glance:

### **ENABLING OPERATIONS**

Corporate communications supports companies in achieving their goals by influencing the service provision process. Examples: It promotes a culture of cooperation; it develops relationships with cooperation partners; it shapes customer preferences. In this way, communication influences the attitudes and actions of stakeholders, which are reflected in financial results or a higher company value.

### **BUILDING INTANGIBLES**

Reputation, brand, or corporate culture are intangible assets that are part of a company's value. Corporate communications can make a considerable contribution to building, maintaining, preserving, developing, or restoring them. A strong reputation and an attractive brand are not only relevant for the environment, but also contribute to a strong corporate identity and culture.

### **ENSURING FLEXIBILITY**

For companies, flexibility means having sufficient room for maneuver to secure business activities and pursue strategic goals. Sufficient trust among the most important internal stakeholders is just as important as a resilient network of relationships with external stakeholders. Communication protects the legitimacy of the company's actions and develops trust in its future. This is particularly essential in times of change and crisis: when relevant stakeholder call the "licence to operate" into question, transactional costs rise and fewer qualified employees get attracted.

## **ADJUSTING STRATEGY**

Corporate communications supports the development opportunities of companies by unlocking innovation potentials and promoting crisis resistance. The systematic observation of public opinion in traditional as well as social media, of discussions in the markets plus discourses in politics and society, helps to align the organization's strategy with socio-political and economic developments. In this way, corporate communications also helps to identify competitive advantages.

## **CUSTOMIZED APPLICATION**

A look at value creation provides a holistic picture of the organization's corporate as well as communication goals. Not every corporate objective offers a starting point for corporate communications or can be supported by it. It is therefore important to adapt value creation to different business framework conditions. The significance of the four dimensions of value creation varies depending on the type of company and strategy, the competitive environment, and the communication situation.

The Communication Value Circle can be a compass or template for planning in order to prioritize the overarching corporate goals and derive communication objectives. It also shows where there are gaps, contradictions or deviations and where other priorities should be set. There is no right or wrong solution.

Specific sets of performance indicators, measurement tools, and evaluation methods can be linked to the communication objectives. The Communication Value Circle thus serves to justify the added value of communication, but also as a basis for the systematic measurement and evaluation of target achievement.

The Communication Value Circle can be applied to determine the most important communication objectives based on the business model and corporate goals. It is also useful for critically reviewing existing communication objectives and readjusting the distribution of resources. In addition, the Communication Value Circle is an excellent way to show top managers and decision-makers in business and specialist areas how communication contributes to the overall goals of the organization and how versatile the impact of communication can be.

**WITH  
WHAT?**

## 3. RESOURCES & REVENUES

What resources corporate communications uses

What resources do we receive to fulfill our tasks? The “Resources & Revenues Model” sets out the equipment and resources with which a communication department works. It also shows how the success of the department’s own work is visible as revenue or income and how it can be maintained. This creates a reliable basis for the planning and implementation of corporate communications.

### **FOUR DIMENSIONS ARE TO BE DISTINGUISHED:**

- Recognition & acceptance,
- Mandate & responsibilities,
- Staff & support,
- Budgets & income.

Benchmarking in the long-term trend shows that budgets and personnel resources for corporate communications are declining or stagnating. At the same time, requirements for corporate communications have increased enormously. A communication department now has significantly more tasks to cope with: consulting is increasingly demanded internally, and more and more digital media and channels are to be filled. In a complex social environment, it is necessary to deal with the diverse expectations of the company’s stakeholders in terms of communication. This makes the question all the more important: what financial resources, personnel capacities, and support services must the organization provide to the communication department, and how can they be distributed and maintained?

### **RECOGNITION & ACCEPTANCE**

The degree of internal recognition not only influences the openness to suggestions from corporate communications and its room for maneuver within the organization. The internal esteem of the communication department also has a significant impact on the resources and budgets allocated to it. Recognition and acceptance become clear in various ways: the participation of the head of communications in board meetings,



joint appearances by board members with communicators, the demand for internal communications consulting, or the allocation of strategically important projects.

## **MANDATE & RESPONSIBILITIES**

The comprehensive and concretely defined assignment of top management for corporate communications is fundamental. It provides the authority to assert its leadership role internally in shaping relationships with all the organization's stakeholders. It is also a necessary prerequisite for orchestrating strategic communication, profiling the brand, protecting reputation, and acting effectively in crisis situations. In terms of mandate and responsibilities, the following must be defined: sovereignty over communication topics, control of strategic communication, the right of veto over other areas of the company, and transparent reporting and coordination routines.

## **STAFF & SUPPORT**

Adequate personnel resources must be made available to fulfill the tasks of a communication department (such as internal or marketing communications). Personnel resources can be evaluated according to full-time positions (or "full-time equivalent") or headcounts. In addition, the extent to which the communication department can access resources within the organization, such as IT, HR or controlling services, must be clarified.

## **BUDGETS & INCOME**

In most cases, a communication department does not have its own income, but receives annual as well as project budgets from top management. Budgets should be adjusted to support the company's strategic goals and meet the demands of modern corporate communications. Resources also include supporting infrastructure, i.e. workspaces as well as technical and workplace equipment. If an organization provides for internal billing, project-based revenues can be generated through services for internal customers. Such revenues enable corporate communications to implement further measures. The following always applies: the communication department should not take on the role of an internal service provider.

The higher the value placed on corporate communications by top management, the more financial and personnel resources the communication department tends to receive. The allocation of resources therefore depends on the extent to which the communication department meets the expectations and objectives of top management, the visible value it adds, and how it is perceived internally.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Brockhaus, J., & Zerfass, A. (2022), S. 53–70.

# HOW?

## 4. OPERATING MODEL

How the communication department provides its services

Companies are constantly adapting to challenges in their environment. Corporate communications must also continue evolving to fulfill its mission. The “Operating Model” refers to the functionality and working methods of corporate communications.

### **EIGHT DIMENSIONS ARE RELEVANT FOR THE OPERATING SYSTEM OF A COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT:**

- Mission & Alignment,
- Structure & Coordination,
- Governance & Steering,
- Processes & Methods,
- Technology & Assets,
- Insights & Knowledge,
- Partnering & Network as well as
- People & Culture.

Companies are under pressure to transform. Technological progress, new competitors, and growing influence of critical stakeholders are forcing constant change. Where strategies change, their implementation usually needs to be redesigned as well. This is where the operating model comes into play: it translates strategy into operational implementation. It describes the way in which the products and services that create value for the company are produced. Whether processes and structures or working methods and mindset—the operating model is about the “how”. It is often also referred to as the “operating system”.

In corporate practice, there are various descriptions of operating models. However, there is none that refers specifically to communication departments. The challenge for corporate communications to keep pace with the evolution of the operating model is twofold. On the one hand, because it must constantly react to the company’s new strategies, business models and operating systems. On the other hand, the framework conditions for corporate communications are also constantly changing.

The fragmented, digitalized communication landscape is leading to a convergence of corporate communications, marketing, as well as sales and HR. Communication services have long been provided at various points in the company beyond the communication department. This requires coordination across disciplinary boundaries, and greater integration in the implementation of activities. We therefore also see an operating model as a collaboration model for communication. It can be developed in eight dimensions:



## 1. MISSION & ALIGNMENT

The purpose and self-conception of corporate communications are the basis for its positioning within the overall organization. The corporate strategy always serves as a fixed point to which the communication department aligns, so that it can make the greatest possible contribution to the company's success.

## 2. STRUCTURE & COORDINATION

The set-up respectively structure of the communications department describes how it organizes its tasks and how it is integrated into the overall organization. It is also necessary to decide which committees and formats are required for coordination and decision-making and which reporting lines exist. Organizational developments in communication departments are usually aimed at acting faster and more flexibly and overcoming internal silos. This is why the set-up following an agile model is currently being discussed.

### **3. GOVERNANCE & STEERING**

Governance determines how decisions are made and management tasks distributed—such as the allocation of budgets and personnel resources or the filling of positions. Quality standards must be secured through guidelines and directives. To evaluate the impact of communication and measure the efficiency of collaboration, control methods (e.g. OKR) are selected and reporting formats defined. It is also necessary to regulate how approvals are to be made and what decisions can and should be made by the teams. Overall, the aim is to prioritize and concentrate responsibilities within the communication department.

### **4. PROCESSES & METHODS**

A process map provides an overview of the core tasks of corporate communications—such as board positioning, media relations, or issues management. The processes must be described for all core tasks, considering communication with the various external stakeholders as well as internal consulting and support for managers. All processes must be designed in a way that they meet a dynamic and complex environment and guide communicators in their day-to-day work. The systematic use of management methods (e.g. customer journey) can support this.

### **5. TECHNOLOGY & ASSETS**

Modern digital corporate communication is not realisable without extensive investment in technology. Decisions need to be made on how to set up the IT systems, from IT infrastructure to tools and applications. This includes platforms for internal collaboration as well as solutions for the provision of digital assets (e.g. digital asset management respectively media databases).

### **6. INSIGHTS & KNOWLEDGE**

In this dimension, it must be clarified how knowledge and experience are managed and made available in corporate communications. Access to insights and knowledge must be organized via systematic knowledge management. In order to regularly generate new findings, the requirements for monitoring and analysis must be defined. They are intended to enable transparent and data-driven decision-making to improve decision quality.

### **7. PARTNERING & NETWORK**

Numerous corporate communications tasks require the involvement of experts outside the company's own communication department. Here, it is necessary to define how cooperation with internal partners succeeds and how an external network of agencies, experts, and service providers can be established and coordinated. Especially in the context of integrated corporate communications, cooperation with interfaces must be designed efficiently and in partnership.

## 8. PEOPLE & CULTURE

New requirements call for changed competencies and skills. Based on a competency model for corporate communications, it is necessary to describe which skills the communication department needs, to provide its services (such as special technical and methodological knowledge) and how these can be further developed. This also includes cultural guidelines and attitudes that can guide all employees when working together—including and above all the managers in the communication department.

The first step in adapting the operating model is a target image or “Target Operating Model” (TOM). First of all, it is about taking stock: the description and evaluation of the status quo, an analysis of relevant trends, and the opinions of employees, managers, and internal stakeholders. This ensures that the operating model to be developed will be able to meet future communication requirements.

Secondly, it is important for communication to deal intensively with its actual mission. If this has not already been done in another context, it should precede the development of the operating model. The questions here are: What is our mandate, and what is necessary to be able to fulfill it for the company in the future? What is our value contribution and how can we further increase it? What expectations are placed on us and how can we fulfill them even better?

Third, it is helpful to precede the target image with a vision. This can help to develop a common understanding of the longer-term development of collaboration. Such a projection into the future ambitiously describes how communication will take place in the future and can have an inspiring effect on the joint development of the target operating model.

This makes it possible to develop a tangible target image that motivates the design of the operating model. Comparing target image and status quo shows where the need for action is particularly great and changes are urgent. In short: a clear vision, an honest inventory, and a desirable target image are the starting points for designing an operating model. An iterative approach and the early involvement of the team in the communication department are recommended.

## EXPERIENCES FROM PRACTICE:

How to successfully develop and introduce an operating model

**CLEAR PERSPECTIVE:** Before working on the operating model, all parties involved should have agreed on the goal of the journey. Starting point is the commitment to a common target vision based on the expectations of top management.

**FROM HARD TO SOFT:** When it comes to new ways of working, there is a lot of talk about “mindset”. However, it is advisable to start with a stable basic framework and establish clear rules for processes, structures, and governance.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CHART PITFALL:** Organization is more than just an organizational chart. Anyone who starts by “drawing boxes” is severely limiting the design options.

**A LOT OF PATIENCE:** An operating model is not created in three days—both designing and implementing take time and resources.

**COMMON UNDERSTANDING:** Before getting started, everyone involved should clarify whether they have the same understanding of terms as well as the need for action. This may seem trivial, but it is the basis for successful project work.

**BETA MODE:** Implementation is much more difficult compared to conception. A pilot project is a good way to gain experience quickly and then adapt it. An operating model is never finished—it lives and evolves like the people working with it.

# WHAT?



## 5. ACTIVITIES & PRODUCTS

How the communication department provides its services

What are the most important products and services that communication creates based on its budget and personnel resources in order to add value to the organization?

**THE “ACTIVITIES & PRODUCTS MODEL” OF A COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT INCLUDES THREE DIMENSIONS:**

- Creating communication products & services,
- Influencing & engaging stakeholders,
- Advising & enabling internal clients.

### **CREATING COMMUNICATION PRODUCTS & SERVICES**

From content creation to social media channel management to magazine production to event execution: In communications practice, the focus on media, channels and formats predominates. Communication measures should create publicity and reach various stakeholder groups in a contemporary manner.

A common systematization for media and channels is the PESO model. A distinction is made between the channels “Paid” (e.g. advertisements, advertorials), “Earned” (e.g. the use of content by journalists), “Shared” (e.g. forwarded or shared content in social media) and “Owned” (e.g. own publications and websites). The aim is not to serve all channels equally. Rather, it is important to select and combine them correctly according to the tasks at hand.

The day-to-day operational focus can lead communications departments to focus on the production and distribution of communications products and services. Their effectiveness in relation to defined communication goals is easily overlooked. It is therefore necessary to examine the contribution of each measure to the target and whether it can be replaced by a more

efficient one. When developing the service portfolio and selecting and designing media, channels, and formats, it is crucial to consider the information interests and usage habits of the respective stakeholder groups.

Moreover, the efficient use of resources is important, especially when planning with limited budgets and personnel resources. The quality and portfolio of communication products and services therefore not only depend on well-managed core processes, but also on the resources used.

## **INFLUENCING & ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS**

The task of corporate communication is to influence the knowledge and understanding as well as the attitudes and behavior of relevant stakeholders in line with the organization's goals. Traditionally, corporate communication focuses on press and media relations.

But it is not only the change in communications as a result of digitalization and the changed role of classic media in opinion formation that have made it necessary to focus communications activities more on direct exchange and personal dialog with the most important stakeholders. The more complex the environment (e.g. global competition, geopolitical risks), the more difficult the conditions (e.g. the coronavirus pandemic, remote teams) and the greater the changes in companies (e.g. mergers or restructuring), the greater the need for dialog and exchange, interaction, and participation. Companies and their top management are increasingly required to explain their actions and describe their consequences.

Among the most important stakeholders of any organization are its employees and potential employees. In a simple stakeholder chart, three further groups of stakeholders can be identified: Shareholders and investors ("capital market"), customers and potential customers ("sales market"), and the public and media ("acceptance market"). The selection of products and services always involves the question of which communication activities the communications department can use to change or activate the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of these target groups.

## **ADVISING & ENABLING INTERNAL CLIENTS**

Providing internal communications consulting and enabling internal clients to communicate have become important tasks for the communication department. From global challenges such as climate change to local infrastructure measures, stakeholders articulate their interests and expectations of companies in a clear, concise, and emphatic manner. To do so, they use a variety of media and channels that have become more permeable and available as a result of digitization. From Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram to YouTube—employees also use social media channels to communicate independently in their networks, not least on company topics. Employees can hardly be moved by top-down directives but must be convinced by the organizational goals. Major tasks and long-term transformation projects can only be solved on the basis of an integrative, open corporate culture. All of this has led to a sharp increase in the need for internal consulting for corporate communications.

One task is to support employees in their self-responsible communication as “corporate influencers”. This includes providing them with a good orientation on strategy, assisting them in building their own platforms, and setting guidelines for behavior on social media. The main task should be to personally coach top managers and empower them in their role as communicators. The aim is to sensitize them to the possible communication effects of their decisions on relevant stakeholder groups.

# CONTACT

Let's talk about how your  
communication department  
can evolve with the  
Communication Business Model

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